

A CLOSER LOOK

Story by Ron Wilson



Sandhill cranes

Autumn Cranes

For birds as conspicuous as sandhill cranes – some long-necked adults are as tall as fourth-graders – we typically hear them before we ever see them.

After some sky-searching, their rattling *kar-r-r-r-o-o-o* calls lead us to a flock of birds spiraling upward as if their destination is outer space and not a shallow wetland or stubble field on which to loaf.

Sandhill cranes arrive in North Dakota in fall from nesting grounds in Canada en route to wintering grounds much farther south, stretching from the desert Southwest and central highlands of Mexico to the Gulf Coast of Texas. The majority of the migrants are members of the Mid-Continent Sandhill Crane Population, which numbers about 500,000 birds.

Some hunters target cranes in North Dakota where the state is divided into two hunting zones. Hunters here account for 10-15 percent of those birds harvested yearly from the Mid-Continent Sandhill Crane Population. That harvest figure has fallen in the last decade as some birds have taken to staying in Canada longer, in part, because of weather and hunting pressure in the state.

“Sandhill cranes are very wary,” said Mike Szymanski, Game and Fish Department migratory game bird biologist, of the long-lived birds. “They can see hunters from so far away.”

Sandhill crane populations declined drastically, according to scientists, between 1870 and 1915. Birds disappeared from nesting grounds because of human settlement, habitat disturbance and unregulated shooting. Hunting was resumed in North Dakota in 1968 after a half-century of closure.

Migrating cranes have been a fixture in North Dakota both in spring and fall for years. Birds nesting here have been another story. This summer, for only the third time in 91 years, it was confirmed that a pair of sandhill cranes nested successfully in the state in McHenry County.

Before nesting, sandhills perform a dance to strengthen their tie. Adults jump several feet into the air, dip and bow and throw sticks and grass into the air with their bills.

The female will lay one to three eggs on a large mound in a marsh that resembles a muskrat hut, or on dry ground. Incubation, a duty shared by both sexes, lasts 30-32 days.

A young sandhill crane is called a colt and can walk as soon as it hatches. Flying comes later, after about 10 weeks. Young stay with adults until the following spring, learning along the way the flight paths that funnel them through North Dakota twice a year.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.